

Research on the Syllabi of Literature Courses in Japanese Universities

大学における文学コースのシラバスに関する研究

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This study aimed to investigate the aims, literary periods, materials, teaching staff, and assessment methods of current English literature courses in Japan to reveal weak points in the way these courses are designed and to provide recommendations for future course development. For this study, 20 literature course syllabi from two private universities and five national universities from various parts of Japan were downloaded from their homepages and examined in October 2018. By examining the contents of the syllabi, the results showed that *The Twentieth Century* and *The Victorian Age* are the key literary periods that are covered, but courses focusing on the history of literature were also equally common. Furthermore, most courses were taught by Japanese male teaching staff, although there were several non-Japanese male teaching staff and Japanese female teaching staff in this sample group. Regarding teaching materials, over half of the teaching staff clearly stated they provide handouts, but students are required to purchase at least one novel and not a textbook for most courses. Unfortunately, this study did find that the aims of literature courses are not always clearly written or carefully linked with assessment methods. Overall, the results suggest that there is a great deal of variety among the syllabi of literature courses at universities, but more clarity in the design of the syllabi could be beneficial for students.

Key words: literature courses for EFL learners, syllabi

1. Introduction

1.1 Impact of Policies on Literature Education

In 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, n.d) developed a plan to cultivate “Japanese with English abilities” and since then there has been many attempts to increase the importance of communicative English in all levels of English education in Japan. This in turn has led to major changes at universities with a growing number of departments changing their names by adding words like *global*, *international* or *practical*, but unfortunately literature departments have often been reduced or literature courses filled with students who simply want to gain credits for teaching qualifications. Thus, the emphasis on communicative and practical skills has meant the future of literature courses in Japan is looking quite negative.

1.2 Benefits of EFL Literature Courses

However, is it simply because of policy change, or have literature courses been sacrificed without considering their true potential? Literature is generally considered to provide an authentic context that can assist language skill development, knowledge of social, cultural, historical and political backgrounds of other countries, word knowledge, reading comprehension and critical thinking skill development.

To start with, all language skills can be developed using literature. Naturally, most students expect to develop reading skills through intensive or extensive reading practice in literature courses, but also speaking skills can be developed through discussions, debates and presentations and depending on the course, DVDs of literature can also help develop listening skills. Furthermore, writing skills can be focused on with book reviews and essays about literature or the authors who wrote them. Thus, unlike other courses all language skills can be worked on within the same lesson.

A second benefit of the context that good literature courses can provide is the way students can effectively learn about the social, cultural, historical and political background of other countries and expand their intercultural awareness. This is of particular importance since some English teachers in Japan neglect the need to place language learning in a meaningful or authentic context. By using “meaningful contexts that are replete with descriptive language and interesting characters” (Van, 2009, p.2), students can learn new words in context on the one hand, and then go beyond word level and have in depth discussions to further their comprehension.

But most importantly, literature courses are particularly unique since using critical thinking skills are a regular feature of such courses. Lee (2014) points out that

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critical thinking skill development is a major skill which university courses should strive to develop and without literature courses a lot of English departments in Japan are similar to language schools since they focus too much on language development and not other skills. Thus, literature courses can provide an authentic context for developing advanced thinking skills.

Overall, there are numerous benefits of having literature courses in Japan, but are university students experiencing the benefits of literature courses with the current way they are being designed?

1.3 Literature Course Syllabi

Up until now, literature courses in Japan have received criticism for their course design (Lee, 2014; Yahya, 2015) since some of them have maintained somewhat outdated approaches that do not consider what is best for EFL learners. This has meant students have few opportunities to experience all of the benefits that literature courses can offer. In order to create a syllabus for a literature course, the aims, literary periods, instructional materials and assessment methods are usually meticulously planned.

To start with, the way the aims are described should require careful consideration since students can be motivated or confused by a syllabus. In particular, Miller (1987) recommends that course designers should avoid using words like *understand*, *comprehend* and *be familiar with* since they lead to vague aims and objectives. One valuable source for writing course aims is the pdf created by Heer (2012) for the Iowa State University. This is particularly useful for designing course aims for any course including literature courses.

The literary periods and teaching staff of literature courses in Japan are usually not related to the interests of students but rather they are influenced by the available teaching staff. Literature courses, unlike English Communication courses, are usually not taught by non-Japanese staff which is possibly due to the English proficiency levels of the students in literature courses and the experience and qualifications of non-Japanese staff.

Naturally, course designers can choose from a wide range of literature, such as novels, short stories, monologues, plays, poetry, nursery rhymes and folk stories. However, course designers are no longer required to be dependent on just books and textbooks since there are many other materials, such as DVDs and digital books that are worth considering. Tseng (2010) also points out

that computer-assisted literature teaching (CALT) can make good use of a wide range of resources that are available on the internet.

Another key factor relates to the planning of the content of such courses. Deciding the content is complicated not only due to the range of literary periods but also due to the range of writers and deciding what may be of interest for the students. Often when planning the content of such courses, it requires course designers to select materials that either focus on non-Japanese people as the main characters in less familiar social, cultural and historical contexts, or select materials with characters and stories that link Japanese identity issues in western culture. Lee (2014) recommends two examples for focusing on identity discussions, such as Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1993) that is set in Canada, and Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, California* (1949). However, there is another approach to choosing texts for literature courses which is to select writers like Kazuo Ishiguro (1982) who wrote *A Pale View of Hills* and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Although he was born in Japan, Ishiguro writes in English after living most of his life in England, and Japanese students are naturally curious about such a writer. Thus, there is a wide range of appealing material that might meet the needs or interests of students with relevant themes and everyday language.

Finally, the methods used to assess students' abilities in literature courses has barely been researched but teaching methods can provide some idea about the likely assessment methods. According to Yahya (2015) the Grammar-Translation method (*yakudoku*) is still the main approach used for teaching Shakespeare at university level, but in literature teaching it has "been liberalized by its practitioners to accommodate student response, discussion and even dissention" (p.33), which has naturally lead to the introduction of different assessment methods. Thus, presentations and reports are now more likely to be found in literature courses than ever before.

1.4 Changing Teaching Methods of Literature in EFL

Many studies on EFL literature courses highlight the challenges of developing suitable courses (Al-Darwish, & Shuqair, 2015) and applying effective teaching methods, such as language-based approaches or a reader-response approach according to Rosenbatt's transactional theory (1978). Some universities in Japan with large English literature programs are trying to revitalize literature courses. According to one private university's homepage,

students who major in literature are encouraged to participate in Morning English Sessions and are required to enrol in skill development classes throughout their four years of study. Finally, in their fourth year of their courses the students are offered literature classes using a CLIL approach. (Sophia University Homepage, 2018). Such changes help to narrow the gap between the reading level of students and the reading level that is genuinely required for them to benefit the most from literature courses.

However, for most universities change will need to start from within individual courses through careful reflection about the aims, literary periods, instructional materials, teaching staff, and assessment methods of current English literature courses in Japan.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Questions

This study aimed to investigate the weak points of the syllabi of literature courses in order to provide practical recommendations. This required analysing: the aims, literary periods, instructional materials, teaching staff, and assessment methods of current English literature courses being offered to undergraduate and graduate students in Japan.

The five research questions that this study was guided by included:

1. What are the aims of these courses?
2. What literary period is focused on the most?
3. What materials are currently being used in courses?
4. Who teaches literature courses?
5. How are literature courses assessed?

2.2 Syllabi Collection

In October 2018, syllabi of 20 literature courses from five national universities and two private universities that were offering 15-week courses on either world literature from English speaking countries, American literature or British literature were randomly collected from the internet. During the selection progress, syllabi needed to meet the minimum criteria which involved clearly stating information on the content that was being gathered. In some cases, more than one syllabus was chosen from some sites to ensure the ratio between male/female and non-Japanese teaching staff /Japanese teaching staff was the same as the ratio within the universities where the syllabi were obtained.

It is also worth noting that out of the 20 syllabi

collected, 12 were from undergraduate courses and the remaining were from graduate courses. During the collection process there did not appear to be any outstanding differences between the syllabi of these two levels which is why both are included in this study. Also, the number from each university type was not controlled in any way which meant syllabi from more national universities were unintentionally collected.

3. Analysis

After gathering 20 syllabi randomly from the internet, four steps were carried out. First, in order to organize the information gathered, the timeline for each literary period needed to be clarified since there are differences not only in American and British literary periods, but there are also different views regarding the timing of literary periods among literature scholars. In order to categorize American literature, the publication date of the book that was used in the course was the key factor for choosing the most suitable literary period. For this study, the British literary periods published in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (7th edition), Volumes 1 and 2 (2000) by Abram and Greenblatt were used.

Next, using Excel, information from each syllabus was placed into the following nine categories: university type (public/private), academic level (graduate/undergraduate), course title, nationality of teaching staff, gender of teaching staff, teaching materials, literary period, assessment methods and course aims. At that stage, some of the information was translated into English by the researcher.

Then, the teaching materials that were listed were checked to confirm the basic content and pricing of materials, before the literary periods were rechecked and placed into the groupings for this study. Also, university homepages were checked for additional information regarding the literature courses that were offered.

Finally, a colour-coding system was utilized to facilitate the identification of patterns in the results and the results were summarized.

4. Results and Discussion

The first research question sought to gain a better understanding of the aims of literature courses in Japan. Courses contained between one to six aims. There were no aims that were uniform throughout all of the courses. The most striking finding of this study was that literature course aims seem to be quite vague due to the overuse of

the word *understanding*. The most popular aim was to understand literature. Also, the most popular course aims could only be found in about half of the courses in this study. Nearly every course had several aims. Key aims included: to develop students understanding of literature; to read or practice intensive reading; to understand the historical, social and cultural context and to critically analyse or evaluate literature. These aims appeared in roughly half of the courses and are shown in Table 1 below.

Surprisingly, only nine courses included developing critical analysis skills or the ability to critically evaluate as one of their goals. Furthermore, only seven of the eight courses examined from national universities stated that to practice critical analysis was one of their course aims which suggests that students enrolled in national universities might not have opportunities to develop critical thinking skills in literature courses due to different initial course aims.

In almost half of the literature courses in this study, a common aim was to understand the social or cultural context of the literature presented. Three courses aimed to develop knowledge of the history of literature and nine courses included understanding the historical context of the literature. Surprisingly, half of the courses stated merely reading or intensive reading practice as an objective of the course and only four courses aimed to discuss the importance of the literature that they were focusing on. However, one important discovery was that only two courses included understanding the problems or nuances of translation which indicates a movement away from translation in literature courses.

Table 1. Major Aims of Literature Courses (N=20)

Course Aims	Number of Courses
To understand the literature	13
To read or practice intensive reading	10
To understand the historical context	9
To understand the social & cultural context	9
To critically analyse or evaluate literature	9
To discuss the importance of the literature	4
To gain knowledge of the history of literature	3
To recognize translation problems	2
To be able to do research	1
To write an essay using knowledge	1

The second research question in this study aimed to determine which literary period was covered the most in literature courses in this study. There were two literary

periods that were slightly more common including: *The Twentieth Century* and *The Victorian Age* as shown in the Table 2. For these two periods, the focus of the courses tended to be on just one writer.

An additional two categories were added during the analysis of the data to include courses that covered more than one literary period. These two categories were labeled : *two literary periods* and *three or more literary periods*. Roughly, a quarter of the courses in this study covered three or more literary periods and aimed to focus on the history of literature. These courses tended to cover both American and British literature and one covered mainly children's literature. Also, in the syllabi of those courses, students were asked to purchase a set textbook and in some syllabi the provision of handouts was also clearly stated.

Table 2. Literary Periods of Literature Courses (N=20)

Main Literary Periods of Courses	Number of Courses
500-1485 The Middle Ages	0
1485-1603 Sixteenth Century	1
1603-1660 Early Seventeenth Century	0
1660-1785 The Restoration & the Eighteenth Century	0
1780-1830 The Romantic Period	1
1830-1901 The Victorian Age	5
1890-1901 The nineties	2
1900s- The Twentieth Century	5
Two Literary Periods	1
Three of More Literary Periods	5

The third research question aimed to determine what materials are currently being chosen. According to this study, materials introduced in university courses at undergraduate and graduate level tend to be either one book containing a number of writers or one or two books written by the writer the course is focusing on.

Courses that examine the work of a range of writers sometimes require the students to purchase a textbook, such as *A brief history of English Literature* (2013) by Peck & Coyle in order to introduce a chronological narrative of major literary periods or a book which includes a number of stories, such as *The Oxford Book of Short Stories* (1981). However, only six courses out of the 20 courses required the students to purchase a textbook as shown is Table 3.

Out of the 20 courses there was surprisingly little overlap in the writers that were focused on. In fact, Kazuo Ishiguro, James Joyce, Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling

and Mark Twain were the only names that appeared in more than one course.

On the other hand, nine courses required students to purchase a book like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (2003) which can be purchased for under 1000 yen or a popular novel like *The remains of the Day* (1989) by Kazuo Ishiguro which costs slightly more. Textbooks that introduce students to the historical settings of literary works tend to cost more than 2000 yen which is a similar price to textbooks for non-literature courses.

Finally, only one course required students to purchase the kindle version of *The Sonnets* by William Shakespeare edited by Evans (2006) and almost half of the teaching staff clearly stated that there are handouts for their courses and two syllabi clearly stated that students are required to download and/or print out some materials.

Table 3. Materials Listed in Literature Course Syllabi (N=20)

Course Materials	Total No. of Courses Requiring Materials
Textbook	6
Novel/s	9
Digital book	1
Must download handouts	2
Handouts provided	9

(Some courses had more than one answer)

The fourth research question aimed to reveal who teaches literature courses at university level. As can be seen in Table 4., the results of the survey show a relatively high percentage of Japanese men are teaching literature courses which is likely to influence the types of themes and materials that students may be introduced to in their courses. However, there were a few Japanese female teaching staff in this study, and slightly more females were teaching literature courses at private universities.

Also, all non-Japanese teaching staff were male and accounted for only small percentage of the teaching staff. It was not possible to determine whether this factor would influence the language of the literature classrooms but judging from the syllabi collected, non-Japanese teaching staff had prepared their syllabi in English whereas Japanese teaching staff had prepared theirs in Japanese. The content of the courses by the non-Japanese teaching staff tended to focus on either British or American literature and in this study writers from Australia, Canada and New Zealand were only represented

in one textbook called *The Oxford Book of Short Stories* (1981) by Pritchett. This textbook does have short stories by authors from various countries although most of the stories are by American writers. Finally, it should also be mentioned that there were no clear patterns in the choice of literary period between Japanese and non-Japanese teaching staff of literature courses.

Table 4. Nationality & Gender of Teaching Staff of Literature Courses at University Level in Japan (N=20)

Gender	% of Japanese Teaching Staff	% of non-Japanese Teaching Staff
Male	60% (12)	15% (3)
Female	25% (5)	0% (0)

(Numbers in Brackets indicate actual numbers of staff)

The final research question intended to clarify how literature courses are currently being assessed. Basically, students are assessed with two to five methods. The most common form of assessment was testing which was popular in 12 of the courses and testing is a slightly more popular method in national universities. However, testing accounts for anything between 20-80% of the assessment in those 12 courses. Whereas presentations generally only accounted for 10-20% of the total score. Participation and discussion were also assessed in some classes, but the percentage of the assessment score also varied a great deal and sometimes the information was not clearly stated. This suggests students probably feel quite confused about what to expect regarding the assessment of literature courses due to the extreme diversity among the assessment styles of teaching staff.

For this study, the aims and assessment methods were also compared. By investigating the syllabi, it was ascertained that several courses did not appear to clearly link the aims of the course and the assessment methods. Below are some examples of course aims and assessment methods of three literature course syllabi. The aims and assessment methods of each syllabus has been listed randomly.

Table 5. Course Aims and Assessment Methods in the Syllabi of Literature Courses

Syllabus	Aims	Assessment Methods
Syllabus A	To practice intensive reading	short papers 40%
	To understand historical aspects of modern literature, critical approaches to understand literature	mid-term test 20%
	To discuss historical contexts, genre and style, significance of fiction in contemporary culture	final-written exam 40%
Syllabus B	To critically analyse texts	English essay 80%
	To understand and search for the historical, cultural and social contexts	participation & oral presentation 20%
	To express your views	
	To write an English essay about the knowledge you have gained	
Syllabus C	To understand the initiation of American Literature	presentation 10%
	To understand American history and culture	report 20%
	To correctly comprehend and understand ways of evaluating	test 70%

In syllabus A, at least 80% of the assessment is based on their ability to write about the course content. Although, it could be more since the type of mid-term test is unclear. It could be a speaking, reading, writing or listening test. However, writing was not one of the skills that was included in the aims.

In syllabus B, the aims are much more clearly stated than many other courses. However, the amount of the total assessment score for the writing task is clearly indicating that the course designer considers the essay to be more important than expressing views which is also included as one of the aims.

Finally, in syllabus C, there are several problems. To start with, the use of words like *understand* and *comprehend* does not encourage critical analysis or personal interpretation. Thus, it gives the impression that students need to gain passive knowledge. Secondly, the type of test which accounts for 70% of the assessment is not clearly stated. Also, one more point is that this course includes a presentation in its assessment, but oral skills are not mentioned in the aims. Therefore, like the previous examples that have been given, the aims and assessment methods could be more directly stated for students to

clearly understand what they should be aiming to achieve by the end of the course. Furthermore, students would benefit from knowing that the aims of the course will be checked through appropriate assessment methods.

5. Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of this study is that it included a relatively small sample of syllabi for analysis due to time constraints and thus the teaching staff ratio may not provide an accurate picture regarding the gender and nationality of teaching staff. Also, in order to administer a more detailed study, it would have been better to have sent questionnaires to educators of courses covering a wide range of universities. However, this study does provide sufficient information for understanding the basic trends, positive developments and problems of literature courses.

6. Recommendations

Overall, by analysing the 20 syllabi, three key points should be noted. Firstly, books and textbooks need to be carefully considered when they are going to be used in EFL settings. Some of the textbooks and books listed would be very difficult for most undergraduate students and some graduate students to read. Even though reading levels of students may vary greatly between universities, if you consider the overall English level of Japanese students this point is worth highlighting. For less competent readers, graded readers might be more engaging and motivating. However, Hismanoglu (2005) recommends books that are related to the “real-life experiences, emotions, or dreams” (p.57) of the students in EFL classes and some teaching staff in this study have included materials that matches that criteria.

Secondly, students would greatly benefit from having clearer learner outcomes or aims set by course designers. Instead of using vague words like *understand*, using Anderson & Krathwohl’s (2001) The Cognitive Process Dimension may be a good starting point for writing clearer learning outcomes. For example, when literature course designers want to write about aims related to *understanding*, they could use words like *summarize*, *explain*, *compare* and *classify* to clarify what kind of understanding the students should have as recommended in Heer’s learning objectives guidelines (2012). By having clear aims, students will know what they should be trying to achieve by the end of the course. Another additional point to consider as emphasized by Shafieyan (2011) is

that literature courses unlike other language courses require more time for student preparation which means a clear and detailed syllabus is likely to have positive impact on student preparation too.

By showing a direct link between the assessment methods and the aims of the course, the effectiveness of literature courses would also increase. If one of the aims was to be able to summarize the contents of a story orally, then oral assessment, such as a presentation would be suitable. But if another aim was to compare characters from two novels in writing, then a written test or essay would match this aim. Such small changes could transform literature courses by making them even more effective and easier for students to follow.

7. Conclusion

According to this study, the choice of instructional materials, the linking of assessment methods and aims, and the clarity of course aims should be carefully considered when planning literature courses, especially when students are learning English as a foreign language. However, this can be very difficult to change since teachers are often influenced by the way they have been taught. Thus, by starting with small changes in syllabus design, literature education in Japan has the potential to be noticeably transformed.

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